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Book Review: Facing the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Journey, by Ronnie Yimsut

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Facing the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Journey is a poetic memoir about Ranachith “Ronnie” Yimsut’s escape from the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, his journey through the refugee camps in Thailand, and his immigration to the United States. *Facing the Khmer Rouge* is an honest and reflexive memoir about one of the world’s greatest evils inflicted on humanity. Yimsut artfully unveils the realities of war and the physical and psychological violence infringed on human individuals. At the same time, this memoir makes transparent the complexities of displaced refugee survivors and a struggle that involves negotiating and navigating identities and spaces in a foreign world. Thus, the memoir is an effort to find personal healing and peace, and most importantly, it is a critical call for justice and social action for a country worth loving and fighting for.

In revisiting my old recorded memories and writing this book, I ripped open old wounds that never really healed. It was terrible, so horrible of a torture to write out my memories. What kept me going was knowing that I had to express memories or die. Soon after I wrote the first paragraph, the dam broke. I cried, reliving memories of good and bad times. For days, I couldn’t sleep. I cried myself to sleep and woke up shivering, in tears. The anguish and pain were as real as the day they happened. Even as I write these words, the long-ago event feels like yesterday. (p. xvi)

Facing the Khmer Rouge begins in Cambodia before the war as Yimsut recalls growing up in Siem Reap surrounded by nature. He was born into a loving family that extended beyond his father, mother, sisters, brothers to include a close-knit community. He loved them fiercely and drew courage and comfort from each of them. Yimsut describes a childhood that was blissful and adventurous until the age of nine when Pol Pot and his regime, the Khmer Rouge took power. As a young boy, Yimsut experienced firsthand the struggle and change in Cambodia’s



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political regime. He saw the confusion and fear spread among the Cambodian citizens and the violence endured by his family and community. Life moved from bliss to muddy trenches and escaping B52 bombs and whirring bullets became the routine.

These are some of my happiest memories as a little boy in Cambodia. My family loved one another dearly, I had my neighbors and my community to rely upon, and most importantly, I had a country to call my own.

Before I lost my childhood, I lost them all. (p. 15)

The memoir moves into a revealing profile of the Khmer Rouge—their power, control tactics, and the terror exerted on the people of Cambodia. *Angkar*, elites within the Khmer Rouge, forced Cambodian citizens—including Yimsut and his family—into labor camps located in the countryside. Within these camps there was constant and pervasive surveillance, torture and genocide.

Life was strictly controlled. Eating, sleeping, work, dating, marriage, and even the bearing of children were regulated. *Angkar* completely controlled us now. Freedom of expression and movement disappeared. *Angkar* dictated what we did, what kind of clothes we wore, whom we would marry. There was not private property, thought, or opinion—not in the open, anyway. (p. 64-66)

Under the Khmer Rouge regime, death was always a near step away. At the massacre on *Ta Source Hill*, Yimsut was beaten unconscious and left for dead. When he regained consciousness he realized that bodies were piled on top of him—bodies of his family and friends. He escapes. In the mist of his escape, Yimsut finds himself joining a resistance group. It is with them that he gained a chance to fight back and seek vengeance for his family whose lives were brutally murdered. The resistance, however, lacked the resources to prove effective against the Khmer Rouge and was short lived. As the Khmer Rouge gains more power and issues more restraints on the Cambodian citizens, Yimsut makes the decision to seek refuge in Thailand. With good omen and fortune, Yimsut finally reach the borders of Thailand.

... it was 10:22 in the morning of February 2, 1978. It was a moment I'd never forget. The feeling of that moment can never be described by words. I, at sixteen years old, an orphan, had finally made it to freedom. At long last, we were free. Being in Thailand, even illegally, gave a sense of closure to my journey. (p. 123)

Upon arrival, Yimsut was sent to *Buri Ram Prison*, a Thai prison, where he endured more abuse from the inmates. He was later transported to *Aranya Prathet Refugee Camp* located on the Thai-Cambodian border where he met Brian T. Ellis with CBS News. This chance meeting gave Yimsut the opportunity to talk about tragedies suffered by the millions of Cambodians under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime. This initial documentation created more opportunities for him to speak about his experiences as a survivor and as a refugee in Thailand. Yimsut ultimately became the face for Cambodians who were victims of a genocidal regime.

He caught me off-guard. I had left the horrors back in Cambodia, and I'd almost forgotten that my parents were dead. As I answered their questions I completely broke down. I couldn't help it. I bawled my heart out and they had to stop the camera. After a few minutes I calmed down. I didn't like crying in public. I was sixteen. I was tough.... My private pain wasn't private anymore. (p. 133-134)

Yimsut was eventually sponsored by his cousin and her family and ultimately immigrated to the United States. In the United States, Yimsut faced many challenges and stress as a displaced immigrant living in a host country. Yimsut writes openly about the bullying he encountered in school, his feelings of "separateness" as an adopted individual, and the pressures of acquiring the English language and assimilating into the American culture. With the support of his extended family, friends, and teachers, Yimsut overcame these challenges and graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in landscape architecture.

I didn't think of Cambodia. I didn't want a car. I didn't want to drive. I wanted to be just like that white kid over there. I wanted to speak English with no accent. I just wanted to be accepted. (p. 148)

The memoir closes where it began with Yimsut returning to Cambodia. It was a journey necessary for him to find personal healing and inner peace. In Cambodia, he visited relatives and old friends who opened their doors to him during his escape. This initial journey inspired Yimsut to return and dedicate time and effort toward rebuilding Cambodia. On his third visit to Cambodia, Yimsut summoned the courage to walk the narrow path down to *Ta Source Hill*, where his family and friends perished, and where he was left to die.

I felt the helplessness once more. The screams and groans returned, but I knew only I could hear them.... My consciousness slipped in and out, between past and present. I clamped down on my terror and walked ahead...toward the spot where I was left to die. I felt fear, bitter pain, and sharp anger. The grief brought me to my knees. I wept. A feeling of relief came over me. I had returned at long last. (p. 202)

In writing this memoir, Yimsut poignantly captures an important piece of Cambodian history by providing an insider's perspective into the atrocities endured by many Cambodian citizens during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. By tracing his personal lived-experiences, Yimsut's memoir offers more than a story about a survivor's triumph. His memoir provides insight into the realities faced by many survivors as they assume the social identity as an immigrant and their hardships of confronting social displacement, immigration, and the terrains of a host country. Furthermore, he makes available the experiences of how immigrants navigate and negotiate between the complexities of hybrid identities and social worlds and the pressures of cultural assimilation. I believe this book will serve well for those interested in learning about the history of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge, and immigrant experiences.

About the Author



Molly Trinh Wiebe is a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction with a program focus in Language and Literacy studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests include teacher education, out-of-school literacy, identity, and social justice education. She has taught elementary and middle school, and English as a Second Language (K-8th) in California.



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